

# Indian Electoral Democracy: The Only Game in Town

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The all pervasive importance given to the electoral aspect of formal democracy in India hides the inefficacy of institutions of democracy and governance as they exist today. In some sense, elections are used as tools of legitimation by the ruling classes of policies that are inimical to the interests of the majority who vote. Why is it then that voters vote?

In *Success of Indian Democracy*, political scientist Atul Kohli notes that it is the institutionalisation of democracy rather than its substance that is celebrated:

Democracy is a valued end in its own right, and thus worthy of serious study in its own right...If citizens across the world clamour for democracy, it is not because of what democracy may bring to them, but because they share a widespread contemporary urge towards self-government.

Kohli's remarks offer an opportunity to question some of its assumptions and draw some lessons. In this essay I hope to show that it matters what you institutionalise, for once institutionalised it is that much tougher to bring about substantial changes in its effects. Further, if we find citizens clamouring for "democracy," it may very well be due to what democracy will bring immediately to them and not due to any deeper urge for self-government. In this sense we can and must question the assumption that elections in India actually signal a working democracy. In this sense, especially at the time of enormous national and global focus on India's remarkably complex and large-scale electoral theatre, we can never be too cautious in our celebration of what passes for "democracy" in India.

Consequently, I will focus here on the "focus on elections". So what does this focus on elections mean at a time of other equally dramatic and far more traumatic processes underway in India? Processes such as mass malnourishment, a massive agrarian crisis, unprecedented internal displacement, breathtaking wealth inequality, increasingly sophisticated hate politics, growing recourse to state repression and terror laws in line with a dubious global war on terror? Here, I wish to ask ourselves to think about how elections can also be an ideological production necessary to keep a particular set of inegalitarian social relations in place and masking many fundamental processes in India.

Close to 60 years ago, B R Ambedkar, the architect of India's Constitution, famously said:

On the 26th January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality...How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of democracy which this Constituent Assembly has so laboriously built up.

I believe that India's well-oiled election machinery (including the mainstream media that almost forces everyone to be glued to the election dramas) have obfuscated such clear minded thinking. I will explore three sites of democracy – economy, law and culture – in relation to elections to explore Ambedkar's warnings.

## Are Elections Antidepressants?

India's impressive growth rate over the last decade and a half has also meant a sliding into greater inequality of income and wealth, and concentration of power in the hands of the wealthy (now thankfully democratised along caste lines, i e, every caste with the possible exception of some of the most stigmatised, can perhaps boast of a fledgling middle class in the making and even a few among the very rich). India ranks 94th in the Global Hunger Index of 119 countries in 2009. More than 27% of the world's undernourished population lives in India while 43% of children (under 5 years) in the country are underweight – much higher than sub-Saharan Africa. An estimated 40% of growth ended up in the pockets of 1% of the population. Not surprising then that India is believed to top the chart in Swiss bank accounts and out-paced China in number of billionaires.

In such a context, Mahatma Gandhi's words that "There are people in the world who are so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread", needs to be amended slightly to say, "or a politician who promises to deliver bread since God does not appear unmediated". Indian political parties know this well and operate according to the dictum: oppose neoliberal reform when speaking to its

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victims, support it when speaking to its beneficiaries, oppose it entirely when in the opposition, embrace all things reform when in power and in closed-door meetings with investors.

Since all parties practise this from the Right to the Left, the net effect is that elections do not derail neoliberal reforms one bit. Elections, Indian democracy and the facts of misery sit cosily together. Let us explore further with a little help from politics in the United States.

Elections in India generate feelings akin to those of Harvard historian Niall Ferguson who described his feelings about Obama's election thus:

it means...the death of racism, the end of the original American sin...Obama can stimulate self-confidence because he is so calm and collected. *He will not simply put an end to the crisis or ensure that banks lend money again. He is a politician, not the Messiah.* But he can change *the national mood* (emphasis mine).

Thus electing Obama calms many people and enables "national mood building" rather than actually dismantling racism or solving the economic crisis. It is what we will call "a feel-good" moment or story. But like all substances that claim to calm, this too wears out quickly. But until then some do feel good.

### Feel-good Effect

The question about Indian elections is: Even if elections are a "feel-good" effect for ruling classes and their hangers-on, why have elections in India not produced the cynicism that it could have produced, as has happened in the us at least for the youth until Obama "hit" them? Much is made of the fact that poor people in India vote almost twice as much as rich people. But, if the poor are voting for their own interests as a working democracy would enable them to, then why is income and wealth inequality growing? Definitely the poor are not simple fools. Neither are they, what Amartya Sen calls "rational fools": able to consistently order their various interests and preferences. Instead, the poor choose an option not from all possible options but from what is given to them and in the context of a set of interests and preferences that are shaped in the political cauldron of "group interests" and "identity" which are themselves functions

of such varied factors as state policies, conditions of political-economy, and power.

Consider this – a recent survey ([http://www.cmsindia.org/cms/Nov\\_Dec%202008.pdf](http://www.cmsindia.org/cms/Nov_Dec%202008.pdf)) by the Centre for Media Studies in Delhi reports that about 37% of people below the poverty line and about 22% of people belonging to the general category are bribed to cast their votes. Is this an "urge to self-government" (as Kohli or any number of "winning" politicians claim) or is it rather an expectation of what casting a vote may bring to them? No lofty ideals of democracy are articulated here. The only game in town being neoliberal reform at all costs, elections bring limited joy for a short period of time.

Despite Ferguson's chiding, the poorest and the least powerful do dream of messiahs and religious revivals since this is what defines their subalternity – the subjectivity that is forced to reproduce its own conditions of oppression as a precondition for its social and biological reproduction. Here, as an anthropologist, I believe that elections could be read as modern day "witchcraft" – a term that is popularly misunderstood as simple superstition (as if there is something very self-evident about any kind of "science"). Instead, as Evans Pritchard had pointed out a long time ago studying the Azande of Sudan, witchcraft is a very complex socialised logic (not a simple superstition) that enables a view of social structure in very personalised ways. It is a logic that is used by people when all other naturalistic explanations fail.

So, like the Azande of Sudan, Indian electors (and politicians) belong to a social belief system in which voting is the attempt to break a spell that has brought misery and bad luck upon them. For the poor (as it is for most of the so-called middle-classes too), a powerful person (rather than a brutal system) is what separates them from going to bed hungry or sustaining a vision of hope to survive another day. After all, every political analyst, popular and scholarly, has agreed that elections have become one of the biggest family businesses in India.

Witchcraft or not, the heterodox political economist Karl Polanyi would have called Indian elections a redistributive-reciprocity-market combination – a sort of

*potlatch* ceremony – a redistributive system with elites giving away some of their wealth (like the rituals of north-west native American groups) not because they acquire status as givers but because the vote acts as a medium for generalised reciprocity as well as a generalised commodity bought and sold to highest bidders.

The main function of elections then seems to be to reproduce social relations including relations of inequality. Not unlike how Bourdieu, the anthropologist Paul Willis and other scholars of education have analysed school systems where "working-class kids get working-class jobs" in a boringly patterned manner. But so what, say some. Democracy in India is vibrant because the poor can vote out politicians. Is not this a cause to celebrate? This gets to my next point. It also reminds me of Oscar Wilde's quip: "We are all lying in the gutter. But some of us are looking at the stars."

### Law: Democracy without Dissent

It would be banal to say that India's ruling classes love Indian style democracy. The truth of this statement is evidenced in the fact that their power and wealth curves converge very nicely, and social revolutions are mostly of the passive variety in India (not so in the subcontinent as a whole). One of the most common refrains about the potential for Indian democracy (or any democracy for that matter) is that although we know that elected representatives will not do the right thing on their own, they will do it under popular pressure from those who voted for them. This is how Obama's election is viewed by progressives who voted for him – keep him on his toes or else he becomes "establishment". The truth of this is already very evident in the kinds of policies and people that Obama is putting into place.

Such thinking is also reflected in a very rich exchange that took place in the pages of the EPW between Chitti Babu and Anand Teltumbde – both intellectuals writing on dalit and caste issues, and both having very different views of the meanings of Mayawati's rise in Uttar Pradesh. In response to Teltumbde's stinging criticism of the lack of any positive impact on the material condition of dalits by Mayawati's regime, Chittibabu responded: "The

question is not what Mayawati can do to UP dalits but what they can do to themselves with BSP around.” Chittibabu’s response, which is a very thoughtful one, assumes conditions of existence and possibilities on the side stage of electoral democracy – people’s movements and lobby groups rather than the main stage – elected representatives. In other words, democracy comes into existence not through elections but through making elected representatives answerable through public pressure and dissent. The question however is: what happens when the space for people’s movements and dissent is itself shrinking or cut down through laws that restrict civil liberties? From where then can ordinary people who have voted actually pressurise their elected representatives to act as their representatives?

Here the importance of judicial accountability becomes paramount since the judiciary has single-handedly taken the wind out of the legislature on issues such as forest laws on which the lives of millions of Indian citizens depend. They now have a “green bench” which allows Sterlite the licence to mine in the Niyamgiri hills even when its parent company Vedanta is denied, and despite the ongoing struggle of the adivasis there to protect their access to livelihood and right to religious freedom. Against all accepted wisdom of world and national commissions on large dams, the Supreme Court rules that they actually “upgrade the ecology”. New principles of fait accompli are instituted to put large projects of national development beyond the pale of any questioning from those who are most adversely affected by them. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are pushed through despite the fact that they are regularly shown to be land scams and have produced one of the largest internal displaced people in the world. All this is compounded with draconian laws that produce seditious citizens without rights, or other laws of contempt that have led to a shrinking of space for any systematic pressure groups to form on elected representatives. This results in the small successes of democracy such as the Right to Information and NREGA getting to be very diluted in their impact. As historian Howard Zinn reminds us:

The Rule of Law does not do away with unequal distribution of wealth and power, but reinforces that inequality with the authority of law. It allocates wealth and poverty in such indirect and complicated ways as to leave the victim bewildered.

### **Culture: Entrenchment of the Banality of Evil?**

More than 50 years ago Ambedkar had also said: “Democracy in India is only a top dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic.” So how far have we really come? Soil fertility in India has reached dangerously low quality. Can we say that the metaphorical soil of democracy is doing any better? One could answer the above question with a yes only by operating with the same logic as political parties in their run for the *gaddi* (the throne of power), or ideologues in their efforts to make “public relations” into reality. In 1996 a perceptive legislator from Assam told former Prime Minister A B Vajpayee in the Lok Sabha debates “Sir, you keep talking about the rapid growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – from 2 seats in 1984 to the majority party in 1996. But, sir, not all growth is good; some growth is cancerous.” Today, we can surely think about this cancerous growth as not only restricted to the BJP and its family of organisations, but also fairly widespread in the Indian political, legal, economic and everyday social spheres. Three examples may suffice.

Economist Jagdish Bhagwati’s astounding remark that farmers commit suicide because they are irrational is reflected in the statement of the ordinary shopkeeper in Chhattisgarh who says that “only idiot farmers commit suicide” or in Chief Minister Raman Singh’s “cool” remark that “not a single farmer has committed suicide due to a loan in the state ever”. This despite 1,600 farmers committing suicide as documented by the National Crime Records Bureau and Chhattisgarh topping the list of all states from 2001 onwards. If this is not hate of dissent, hate of farmers, hate of any democratic questioning of neoliberal policies, then what is?

Varun Gandhi seeking to unabashedly harvest hate is only the latest in a long tradition that cuts across party lines. The hate speech is only the outward manifestation of long festering and well-nurtured

indifference to human suffering and a fetishising of small differences that have become the banality of evil that Hannah Arendt spoke of long ago facing fascism. Hate against dalits, adivasis, women and religious minorities, and definitely those who dare to speak on their behalf and for civil liberties and against human rights violations, is definitely on the rise in democratic India. Hate operates upon fear.

Elections are superbly useful legitimisation tools since any first past the post winner can claim all kinds of “mandates” even on the slimmest majority and under the most undemocratic conditions for elections such as refugee camps in Bastar in Chhattisgarh state where the only culture that rules is the culture of fear and the state and its machinery routinely breeds a vision of triumphalism against all things democratic in the name of protecting people. Not surprisingly, the BJP has managed to hold onto and consolidate itself in exactly those states where it has shown that a combination of “hate-development for the rich, super rich and the wannabe rich – repressive state” works beautifully. Thus hate for adivasis and their culture manifested as tribal re-education and civilisational triumphalism of Hindutva combined with large-scale primitive accumulation backed by strongly repressive state power has paid rich dividends in the belt from Gujarat through Madhya Pradesh (despite some losses) right through Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand (total wins), and some parts of Orissa (especially Kandhamal).

In the light of such realities it is useful to remember that George Bush once said: “The notion that...somehow we’re not making progress [in Iraq]...I just don’t subscribe to. I mean, *we’re having elections*” (emphasis mine). Such faith in elections as has been shown by imperial masters does not allow us to talk easily about elections as an unmediated public good anymore in the 21st century. And yet elections operate like a prison-house of discourse, limiting vision and conversation about democracy. The social thinker Pierre Bourdieu once said of neoliberalism that it “is not just one discourse among many. Rather, it is a ‘strong discourse’ – the way psychiatric discourse is in an asylum.” It allows no space for

challenging its foundations once you are admitted into the asylum. We know this is true since even though the truth about finance capitalism is out, regulation and nationalisation are still bad words in official and everyday discourses. Elections and electoral politics are one

such “strong” discourse, and democracy that asylum.

One cannot question electoral politics without appearing undemocratic. Electoral politics has a way of delimiting what democracy means. So, other forms of democracy (deliberative or proportional representation

or even electoral reforms) are placed in the “insane” box too easily. And yet we need to take such a risk every time Indian elections arrive, not least because we learn about our freedom by seeing what is inside its prisons, and learn about our sanity by seeing who is inside its asylums.